

Stephen R. Shaver

Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

March 31, 2024

Easter Day, Year B, Revised Common Lectionary

[Isaiah 25:6-9](#)

[Psalms 118:1-2, 14-24](#)

[1 Corinthians 15:1-11](#)

[John 20:1-18](#)

On this mountain the LORD will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines strained clear. And God will destroy the shroud that is cast over all peoples; God will swallow up death forever.

+ + +

If you go to Jerusalem, sometime in the future, God willing, when it will be possible to visit the Holy Land again as a pilgrim; if you go to Jerusalem and you visit the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, just in front of you as you walk in you'll see a long, flat stone on the floor, surrounded by candlesticks at each corner, with a row of lamps hanging above.

It's called the Stone of Unction; the anointing stone. It commemorates the anointing of Jesus's body, after he was taken down off the cross, before his burial. If you stand nearby, you'll see people coming in: pilgrims from around the world, locals, the pious, and some of the just curious as well. Many come in, go straight to the stone, kneel or prostrate themselves, and press faces and hands against it, kissing it, venerating this symbol of the loving care of Jesus' friends for his crucified body.

Some people do more than this. Especially among Orthodox Christians, it's customary to buy a linen shroud to save for your own burial, and to bless it by bringing it to the Anointing Stone. As you lay out your shroud on the cool, long, flat stone, you unite your own death with the death of Christ. And then you have your shroud: something to take home, knowing it will one day be spread out over your body, a tangible symbol that your own death is wrapped up in that of the one who has gone before you.

The prophet Isaiah speaks of death as a kind of shroud cast over the whole world. Certainly that shroud is with us today. In the land where Jesus himself lived and died and was buried, in Gaza and the West Bank and Israel, the shroud of death is hanging heavily on so many. In Ukraine and Russia, in so many other places where conflicts rage, known to us and unknown. In Baltimore where families mourn their loved ones killed in the bridge accident last week. In countless hospital rooms where people are living and dying in ways that happen every single day and yet mean everything to those who are living those stories from the inside. Even what we may be able to think of as a good death still comes with its share of loss and mourning.

Just this past Thursday our congregation lost a beloved member, Joe. Joe was 86, an age where he and the many people who loved him might have wished for more years, but an age that doesn't in itself count as tragically early. He died in a way that was gentle and free of pain; after a health decline of about a month, not agonizingly long nor so sudden as to rob his loved ones of goodbyes; after all his children, including one who lived far away, had successfully gathered around him; after visits from beloved friends, including members of our choir who came to sing with him; after receiving the prayers and rites of his church; after telling me he was ready to go and be with God and with his beloved wife. Joe had a death that was in many ways holy.

And yet Joe has still died—and just by itself, that is enough to grieve.

St. Paul calls death an “enemy,” and he is right. Because even a gentle death is still an end and a loss. And far too many deaths are far from gentle, far from expected, far from fair. And we are right to rage and mourn at that. We are stuck under this shroud and it is the human condition and we long for more, for a story without an ending, for a love that isn't doomed to be snuffed out. We need someone to tear this shroud off us.

Today we have gathered to celebrate that this is just what God has done.

The story we just heard from John's gospel tells us that the disciples found Jesus's shroud that Easter morning, lying there in the tomb. Somehow, in the mystery of that holy night, Jesus shrugged off his burial shroud and put on immortality. The one who had been crucified, who suffered a death that was not good and not beautiful, who was crushed under the injustice we human beings inflict on each other, whose story was over. Until it wasn't.

God raised Jesus from the dead. And what God can do for Jesus God can do for us. And God *does* do for us.

Last night at the Great Vigil of Easter Deacon Phina Borgeson preached about the tradition of putting special robes on those newly baptized as a sign that these new members of Christ's body have put on Christ like a garment and are now clothed with his own life forever. In our church people often wear that white robe when they're serving as leaders in worship. But whether you're serving or not, if you've been baptized, you're invisibly robed in Christ's life every single day. When we're baptized God joins us to Jesus in his own body and his own life, the life that couldn't be quenched, flows through us. When we share the holy meal that is his living presence, his own life, his body and blood, nourishes us.

If you haven't been baptized, God invites you to this same life. You are already a child of God, and God loves and cherishes you, and perhaps the Spirit is inviting you to wonder whether you too might be called to these waters, to be joined with Jesus in his death and in his rising.

At Christian funerals we drape the caskets of our loved ones with a special kind of shroud: the plain white pall that recalls the white robe in which we clothe the newly baptized. When we are baptized we really and truly “put on Christ.” And when we die, we carry that garment with us. So, for Christians, even the very shroud we wear in death is a token of the garment of immortality. God will transform our burial shroud into the heavenly wedding robe. And we will put it on when the trumpet sounds, to wake us into new and life, and to call us to the great banquet.

On that day the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast, an abundant feast that never ends. But even now, even here in the meantime, we have a foretaste of that feast of rich food, of well-aged wines strained clear.

*Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death, and upon those in the tombs bestowing life!*